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T. H. White's "Once and Future King" provides an antidote of humor for the pessimism found in many modern literary works. As the title implies, many of the book's themes are timeless--the fruitless quest, the eternal triangle, the conflict of desire and morality, and the opposition of good and evil. Other themes--the fall of the leader and the unifying of diverse elements into political unity--are as timely as a news broadcast. The 20th century, despite its scientific and technological advances, has been dominated by myth; and White's book, with its suffering and "existential squirm," "is a veritable bellwether for our time." (Suggested teaching activities for a unit on the quest motif are listed. (LH)

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THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

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BY PAUL F. FLETCHER. *The Once and Future King* is a book that is not getting nearly the attention it deserves, for it is a book, as its title suggests, for our time, for past time, and surely for all time.

White's is one of the most fascinating interpretations of King Arthur and of man's eternal search. Nowadays, it seems to me, young people are being exposed to various literary treatments of the quest motif, yet most of these treatments are pessimistic and tragic without the redeeming grace of the comic, or at least the tragicomic, in life.

Chrestien de Troyes and Layamon and Malory, and later Spenser, up to that final pat answer to the dilemmas posed by the conundrum of the Victorian Compromise, Tennyson —certainly all of these make interesting reading. I must confess that as a lad I myself was somewhat amused by Tennyson's romantic treatment, and I always thought it a pity that Arthur did spend all that time at the office. After all, he did leave Gwen alone with Robert Goulet much too much. O, well, the magnificent cuckold! Of course, Tennyson never presents it this way—he is nothing if not elegaic and Arthur accepts his fate as inevitable. Like poor old Beowulf, he goes down like the sunset in a gold-wreathed smoke of ruin. Perhaps this is why I found the *Idylls* so boring in high school, and in a way only a little interesting in college: standard saccharine treatment in high school; snide commentary by a know-it-all professor in college. Maybe this is also why the students of today would prefer T. H. White's version of the Arthurian legend. White's with it more, at least for our time. White knows the score.

White makes Arthur no inviolable George Washington of the Round Table. We first see Arthur as a boy: properly named Wart. And with all the shifting of time references—Merlin consults the fourteenth century edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—the reader can apply the various happenings to our own time, for Arthur is truly a once and future king.

All the characters (with accent on this word for many) are in the book: Gawaine, hardly the *Green Knight* Gawain here; indeed a lot less stupid than that fellow, yet humanly speaking, often a lot more stupid; Lancelot is no Robert Goulet here. Actually he is ugly like Clegg in Muriel Spark's *Mandelbaum Gate*. In my salad days, I was always rather incensed at Gawaine's behavior (or lack of it) with the complaisant lady in the *Green Knight*. The Anglo-

Nowadays, young people are weaned on "Lord of the Flies," cut their teeth on "A Separate Peace" and/or (depending what the local censors will bear) "Catcher," and finally matriculate into the world of Pinter and/or "Playboy." As an antidote to this solemnity, "The Once and Future King" is a kind of happy book, with sadness too, but basically a happy book with a nice measure of grimness, gaiety and grace that adds up to reality.

Saxon eunuch—then along came Lancelot du Lac—Gallic equating it with spice: The question in my mind being always which one did the *manly* thing could be a mighty good antidote.

An acquaintance of mine recently remarked that there were very few "happy books" students studied nowadays. Everything is the tragic vision, the felix culpa, the change of Philomel so rudely forced.

Twit, twit, twit
Jug, jug, jug
Tereu

Conflict is everywhere. Man in conflict with himself; man in conflict with others, man in conflict with the forces, usually malevolent, around him.

White has a little fun, and it would seem to me that *The Once and Future King* is a kind of happy book, with sadness too, but basically a happy book with a nice measure of grimness, gaiety, and grace that adds up to reality. Nowadays young people are weaned on *Lord of the Flies*, cut their teeth on *A Separate Peace* and/or (depending on what the local censors will bear) *Catcher*, and finally matriculate into the world of Pinter and/or *Playboy*. Well, White's book does, I maintain, rejuvenate the flaccid muscle of romance and comes up not with ritual but with wistful, even fey kind of quality. Well, Camelot was a wonderful idea anyhow.

Let it not be forgot
That once there was a spot,
For one brief, shining moment,
That was known as Camelot.

Yes, I know, Rogers and Hammerstein and Walt Disney —and John Kennedy—got into the act, and I guess that's all right. The only thing that bothers me about Disney is that kids think he wrote everything—*Snow White, Treasure Island, Bambi, Pinocchio*—and that is a little sad.

In the book, just before the last battle King Arthur asks a young man named Thomas Malory to pass on the tale. Malory did his best, considering that he and King Arthur were separated by two centuries.

Encyclopaedia Britannica gives various identifications for Camelot (wherever it was): Caerlon-upon-Usk in Monmouthshire, Queen's Camel in Somerset, Camelford in Cornwall and Winchester.

Well maybe it isn't exactly clear who Arthur was, or what or where Camelot was. But imagine Richard Burton or Richard Harris singing:

Camelford, Camelford!

or As I was wandering in the dusk
of Caerlon-upon-Usk.

or Elain, the lily maid of Queen's Camel

Yet, perhaps in his time compressions T. H. White might have had Lancelot hurrying back to Guinevere offering:

I'd walk a mile for a Queen's Camel

or Am I sinning more now
and enjoying it less?

You see, it's the book that's done this to me. I would be as bad, I fear, as Walt Disney—indeed closer to Terrytoons.

Lyrical License of Lerner and Lowe? Well, as Kenneth Tynan points out, in *My Fair Lady* Lerner made Shaw's fanatically grammatical Professor 'enry 'iggins commit two syntactical errors, separated by a split infinitive, within the space of three lines.

Well, whoever Arthur was, modern scholarship seems to think there really was an Arthur and archeological diggings seem to indicate there was a real Camelot.

The Once and Future King starts off with Wart's early "eddication" as Cockney Sir Ector calls it, and the reader is introduced early to an infinite variety of characters: like the governess with red hair who had a wound on her sitdown that she offered to show to Sir Ector:

> had hysterics and was sent away. They found out afterwards that she had been in a lunatic hospital for three years. (p. 9)

Sir Grummore is always questing for the Questin' Beast. The jumbling of time—like Stetson among the ships at Mylae, but much more fun—includes running an ad for a tutor in the *Humberland Newsman* and *Cardoile Advertiser*.

There are some excellent descriptions of the dark woods in the area and the man who got his nose bit off and how he haunts the woods, and Wart's being shot at by an unknown assailant. The boy gets lost in the woods and falls asleep. The writing is exquisite:

> The boy slept well in the woodland nest where he had laid himself down, in that kind of thin but refreshing sleep which people have when they begin to lie out of doors. At first, he only dipped below the surface of sleep, and skimmed along like a salmon in shallow water, so close to the surface that he fancied himself in the air. He thought himself awake when he was already asleep. He saw the stars above his face, whirling on their silent and sleepless axis, and the leaves of the trees rustling against them, and he heard small changes in the grass. These little noises of footsteps and soft-fringed wingbeats and stealthy bellies drawn over the grass blades or rattling against the bracken at first frightened or interested him, so that he moved to see what they were (but never saw), then soothed him, so that he no longer cared to see what they were but trusted them to be themselves, and finally left him altogether as he swam down deeper and deeper, nuzzling into the scented turf, into the warm ground, into the unending waters under the earth. (p. 27)

Merlyn is Wart's teacher and the bric-a-brac is right out of a time machine gone wild including "a complete set of cigarette cards depicting wild fowl by Peter Scott," and all the wonders in Merlyn's old hat as ample as nuns' pockets.

> Merlyn took a dead mouse out of his skull cap. "I always keep them there, and worms too, for fishing."

Merlyn initiates Wart into the world of nature, including "a peek at neurotic roaches" and ultimately changes the boy into different animals. The climax of all of this occurs when Merlyn changes the boy into a hawk and puts him in

a hawk coop with other assorted hawks, including one that is psychotic:

> Only in the far corner of the room which had been netted off for Cully, they could hear a faint muttering from the choleric infantry of Colonel, (the mad hawk). "Damned niggers," he was mumbling. "Damned administration. Damned Damned Politicians." "Damned Bolsheviks." (p. 78)

And when the other hawks try to get our hero to stand near the mad hawk:

> Oh no! no your ladyship. I beg of you not to do that, I am such a damned villain, your ladyship, that I do not answer for the consequences. Spare the poor boy, your ladyship, and lead us not into temptation. (p. 82)

There is poignant warning in this last strand of sanity in the poor demented hawk. (Maybe Swift should have used hawks and not Menippean Houyhnhnms). The element of horror in this scene is so gripping, it has a kind of contemporary Marat/Sade quality: the probable impossible making the reader's hair stand on end.

So "all the sun long" the boy's adventures with his foster brother Kay, his funning, and the horrors too, of growing up are here, all in the most incredible but at the same time highly believable situations. Merlyn too has his horrors, horrors for certain, for he can see the future and he knows that eventually he will make a damn fool of himself and let the Nymph Nimue shut him up in a tree forever.

Now, just as the men of this book are men, the women are women, not just airy sorceresses or fairies, or queens, or lily maids of Astolat or where-have-you. Take Queen Morgause of Lothian and Orkney. Arthur did—as a young man, and of this encounter came Mordred. But her sons, Gawaine and Gaharis and Agravaine are quite startling specimens of the culturally deprived and depraved as well. There is evil here. Magical, yet compelling, real evil. One can feel it. Wart felt it. The dour, lusty, fighting, rascally, scurrilous and yet likable boys from the North felt it too. They knew something was wrong with their mother, Morgause. Yet they always attempted to hide it from themselves. Modern psychological stuff here. It drove them to murder.

Some of the sexual symbolism is not only deep but almost disturbingly beautiful. The Orkney boys will come to have an ambivalent attitude toward Arthur and ultimately an effect in unwittingly abetting Mordred's plots to destroy Arthur's dream of the Peaceable Kingdom. But they have their moments of fun at home where they cavort like the carefree young men they are.

St. Toirdealbhach's cell is nearby and he is another one of the zanies that appear. Imagine a walking St. Somebody! But the boys are lonely, and their mother neglects them. So they often talk with this old hermit.

> "Could you tell us a story?" "What would I be wanting to tell you a story for, and me in my heresies? 'Tis forty years since I fought a natural battle and not a one of me looking upon a white colleen all that time." "You could tell us a story without any colleens or battle in it." "And what would be the good of that then, now . . . What would I want to be a saint for at all, is my puzzle." (p. 251)

He tells them about a witch, and the boys in their own ignorance of their mother's true state, say, "It must be dreadful to have a witch for a mother." Later—

> The boys sat round the door without surprise, waiting for something else to happen. They considered in their minds the questions of wells, witches, and the practices of mothers. (p. 253)

Then there is the episode of the hunt for the unicorn, one of the most beautiful in the book, part tapestry with old primordial yearnings and as fresh and new as Anthony West's *Ferret Fancier*. For truly, puberty is the catch-in-the-throat time of life, and early, exploratory sex (contrary to Holden Caulfield's experiences), can be the most beautiful — if the most ephemeral—sex of all.

They get a Bestiary from St. Toirdealbhach. "There was a picture of a virgin holding the poor creature's horn in one hand while she beckoned some spearmen with the other."

They secure a rather reluctant maid Meg to be bait and boyishly threaten her with spears. The symbolism is obvious enough. "This girl," said Agravaine, "is my mother. This is what our Mammy was at doing yesterday. And I am going to be Sir Grummore." Violent Agravaine is first to attack the poor beast and the scene is reminiscent of the pig hunt in *Lord of the Flies*. But with a difference. The treatment here is more poetic.

There are at least two aspects of the quest in the book. The search for the Grail is one. But also there is the search of King Pellinore for the Questin' Beast. Pellinore, really a good sort, is sleeping with Morgause, and Gawaine has nearly killed his brother, Agravaine, for suggesting what they all know. Pellinore and his two friends, Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides are Kipling types with a little of Mark Twain thrown in. They are happy-go-lucky-stiff-upper-lip sorts. And Pellinore would have never hurt the boys for all the world. Just that the old woman was so willin' and all that sort of thing. Well, not only the boys are concerned. So are Pellinore's friends. The only way they can bring him to his senses is to get him to go after the Questin' Beast and since they believe the beast is dead,

they disguse themselves as the dragon in question. It took them a week to make the costume. They had to do it in secret without Pellinore's getting wise to them.

> "You write poems, Pellinore" they told him "or go and sigh on the cliffs, there is a good fellow." (p. 268)
> "Now, carefully this time. We must walk in step."
> "Left, right! Left, right."
> "I think my haunches are comin' down."
> "If you let go of yours truly's waist, we shall come in half." (p. 269)

So Grummore and Palomides get themselves out on the cold hills one night and manage to attract not Pellinore, but, you've guessed it, the real Questin' Beast, which immed-jetly becomes smitten with them, or it.

When we first meet Lancelot in the Third book of the trilogy—we realize at once the ill-made-knight is a character who will be deep.

> The boy thought that there was something wrong with him. All through his life—and even when he was a great man with the world at his feet—he was to feel this gap: something at the bottom of his heart of which he was aware, and ashamed, which he did not understand. (p. 315)

He had just returned from England where his father had helped the new King Arthur. Arthur had told the young knight he would have a place for him at Camelot. And in truth, Arthur's dream was a kind of United Nations dream in microcosm. Lancelot, too, is troubled by dreams.

There is even a bit of *Games People Play*. Arthur says people ought to behave. They should not commit the atrocities they do. Now everything had become sportmanship. Like some of the excesses of the New Frontier, everyone was trying to beat everyone else at being the best, and making a sham of the ideals of the Round Table. This early U.N. isn't working out.

Lancelot became more and more involved with Guinevere. Adultery was inevitable and it came. Then there was the episode with Elaine. Ironically, out of this liaison came Galahad, who emerges here as a kind of sanctimonious character. But, as time goes on, and the kingdom is running down, something else is required to keep people going. In this case, it is not Phineas' blitzball in *A Separate Peace*, but rather another game. The search for the Holy Grail. The thing is done tongue in cheek, but also with a kind of reverent irreverence for man's eternal quest. All the abuses of a gold rush are on. But there's a God there too.

The characters are deftly sketched. Mordred is "an albino with eyes so blue, so palely azure in their faded depths that you could not see in them." He and the Orkney boys butchered Pellinore's young son Lamorak "for being seduced by their mother, who was three times as old as he was."

The whole problem in geometry—the eternal triangle—is handled with great understanding and a touch of wry humor. Why didn't Lancelot at once lay seige to Guinevere, and take off with her?

> One reason for the dilemma was that he was a Christian. The modern world is apt to forget that several people were Christians in the remote past, and in Lancelot's time there were no Protestants except John Scotus Erigenia. His Church . . . directly forbade him to seduce his friend's wife. (p. 367)

Here the student is exposed to tone, and if he is tone deaf (and many college-bound students equate with the hidebound), an introduction to the subtle approaches of this book might help the student find his sense of humor. A little sad sense of humor, yet one all the same.

For all its scientific and technological advances and its rejection (or maybe only seeming rejection) of superstition and the supernatural, the twentieth century is a myth-and-legend haunted century. Consider the Greek tragedies in a new light, A.F. (After Freud), and remember how the Teutonic myths shook the world in the second Great War. The Arthurian legend may seem a bit marginal to the great issues, yet a late comer T. S. Eliot used the theme in *The Wasteland* and consider in our time the latest version—the young leader married to a beautiful wife, working for civilized values and a peaceful world struck down in his flowering by malice and madness at the height of his career. One might ask whether the new Camelot will have a new Malory, and whether there will be a world to listen.

Yes, the book is a veritable bellwether for our times. All the ingredients are there—the suffering, the existential squirm. In short, a promise, yet with pain.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES The teacher may wish to develop a unit on the Quest Motif. Once you start you will be amazed to find how rich the field is. I have found the following groupings useful.

—1. Gawaine in the Arthurian legend and *Gawaine and the Green Knight*, (Penguin Infocard 55). It is interesting to trace the various knights in the different versions. Note how prissy Galahad is in White's version.

—2. Compare Lancelot with the whiskey priest in Graham Greene's *Power and the Glory* (Bantam Infocard 56). When I was young I was so innocent and so unendurable; when I was older I was so corrupt yet I seemed to understand.

—3. Compare the theme of innocent suffering with Jack Burden in *All the King's Men.* (Bantam Infocard 57).

—4. Compare Wart with Phineas and Gene in Knowles' *A Separate Peace* (Bantam Infocard 58) or with the growing pains of the boy in Anthony West's *The Ferret Fancier.*

—5. Compare the Orkney lads with Alex and his crew in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (Ballantine Infocard 60).

—6. Lancelot and Arthur shrank from giving pain. Yet like Odysseus (literally, "giver of pain") activism seems to require giving pain. Hanging around with Circe or the Lotus Eaters, or Guinevere is no way to get a journey rolling or a Camelot. Anything here?

—7. Compare some of Arthur's reasonable devices to getting people to live in harmony, with the kingdoms in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or More's *Utopia.* Consider Camelot as Utopia. See Helen Felt Tyler's *Age of Ferment* on American Utopias (Harper Torchbook Infocard 59).

—8. Arthur has a kind of fatal flaw—is it pity? How is Arthur like Graham Greene's characters (in one sense) or like *The Centaur* by Updike (Fawcett Infocard 61)?

—9. Read some other books on the quest: Donleavey's *A Singular Man* (Dell Infocard 62), Bellow's *Herzog* (Dell Infocard 63), Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* (Pocket Books Infocard 64) or Bellow's *Adventures of Augie March* (Fawcett Infocard 65).

—10. Compare White's book with Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*

—11. Do you note a certain sympathy with the Roman Catholic Church rather refreshing for a modern writer? Somehow I have the feeling this book is far more ecumenical than a Friday night parish supper for priests, rabbis and ministers. Any comments? Good luck!

All quotations are from the Berkley Medallion paperback, The Once and Future King *by T. H. White (N1320, 95¢. For more info, check Infocard 66).*

Paul Fletcher has published in English Journal, Clearing House, *etc.; he regularly peddles his ideas at Bristol Community College in Fall River, Mass. This is his first appearance in* Media and Methods.